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ABSTRACT

Doubts about the reading vocabulary adequacies of today's high school graduates led to an experiment with a list of 199 difficult words culled from the "Reader's Digest." College juniors and seniors (298 in the first stage and 388 in the second stage) were asked to indicate whether they knew the pronunciation and the meaning of the selected words. Next the students were directed to write the definition, write a description, or use in context words selected in a random pattern from those they had checked as knowing the meaning. Then the students were tested orally on both the pronunciation and the meaning. Because the initial results were quite low, a second study (an exact replication of the first) was conducted later. Second study results confirmed the outcome of the earlier study. Causes of the poor showing seem to be overreliance on context for the meaning of words, focus of phonic programs on pronunciation to the neglect of meaning, and the fact that comprehension is not emphasized and not really valued in early reading programs. (NKA)

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A STUDY OF THE VOCABULARY ADEQUACY OF COLLEGE STUDENT EDUCATION MAJORS FOR READING READER'S DIGEST

by

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Several years ago I listened to a group of faculty colleagues discussing reading vocabulary adequacy. Several of them said they believed "today's" high school students had reading vocabularies which would not be adequate for reading common printed materials. I asked whether by common printed materials they meant such materials as the daily newspaper, Reader's Digest, etc. They did. Others, of course, were not very willing to believe that high school students couldn't read such materials because of inadequately developed reading vocabularies.

I wondered about that for awhile, and then decided to take one monthly issue of Reader's Digest and make a list of all the words I believed high school students likely might not know. I used only the articles, not the ads nor the "increase your wordpower" feature. I was surprised to compile a list of 199 words for which I believed high school students would know neither the meaning nor the pronunciation. When I showed the list to some of the faculty who were involved in that original informal discussion on vocabulary adequacy, several said they believed that even most college students would have difficulty with them. That was the background scenario which led me to conduct a study of college students' vocabulary adequacy.

Those 199 words were put into list form with two columns of blanks, one for meaning, the other for pronunciation. The directions were as follows:

> For each of the words in the following list, 1) Decide whether or not you are <u>sure</u> you know the correct pronunciation. If you decide you are <u>sure</u>, place a check mark in the blank opposite the word in the "pronunciation" column.

> Then, 2) decide whether or not you are sure you know a correct meaning for each of the words, and if you decide you are sure, place a check mark in the corresponding blank opposite the word in the 'meaning' column. (You have a correct meaning if it is quickly thought of, clear, and you fairly quickly can tell it in words.)
>
> After you are finished checking, you will be asked to pronounce and/or define randomly selected words.
>
> Try to limit your time on each word to two or three seconds, decide, and then move on.

After the students were finished, they were asked to write a definition, a description, or use in context words selected in a random pattern from those they had checked as knowing the meaning. Every "nth" word was selected so that each person would give a meaning for 12 words. If less than 12 were checked, all were defined. Then each made an appointment to pronounce every word he checked as knowing the pronunciation.

I reminded the students that the words were not in context, and of the difference between knowing the meanings of words in lists and those same words in context. It was quite surprising to learn that almost every one of the students was of the opinion that if you didn't know the meaning(s) of a word out of context, you didn't know it well enough for satisfactory reading comprehension.

Because the first results seemed unbelievably low, a second stage of the study was done. The second stage was an exact replication of the first, and was done to see to what extent the results would be similar to the surprising results of the first stage.

For the first stage, 298 college juniors and seniors in teacher education class (mostly reading methods classes) completed the

checking, pronouncing and defining of the 199 words, according to the directions aforementioned. This was done during the 78-79 and 79-80 school years. The second stage was done with a group of 388 students who were juniors and seniors in teacher education classes, during the 1980-81, 1981-82 and 1982-83 school years.

The correct and incorrect pronunciations figures are actual count. The correct and incorrect meanings are based on the proportion of correct to incorrect meanings in the sample they defined, applied to the total list. For example, if 50% of the words in the sample were defined incorrectly, then it was inferred that only 50% of all words checked as "meaning known" would be defined incorrectly by that person.

Findings on Pronunciation Ability

Findings on the ability of these college students to pronounce the 199 words from Reader's Digest are shown below:

	Group of 298	Group of 388
Average number of the 199 words students claimed able to pronounce	122 words	124 words
Average percent of the words claimed able to pronounce they did pronounce correctly	82.6%	83.8%
Average percent of the 199 words they "actually" could pronounce (122 x 82.6%, etc.)	100.7 words	104 words
Average percent of the 199 words they "actually" could pronounce	50.6%	52.2%

Findings on Knowledge of Meaning

Findings on these students knowledge of the meaning of the 199 words taken from Reader's Digest are:

	Group of 298	Group of 388
Average number of the 199 words for which students claimed to know a meaning	56 words	58 words
Average percent of correct meanings for samples of words checked as knowing meaning	63.9%	63%
Average number of the 199 words for which they "actually" knew a meaning	35.8 words	36.5 words
Average percent of the 199 words for which they "actually" knew a meaning	17.98%	18.34%

Findings Summary

According to procedures used in this study, these two groups of 298 and 388 college students could pronounce 50.6% and 52.2%, respectively of these 199 words from an issue of Reader's Digest, and knew the meaning for 17.98% and 18.34%, respectively, of the same 199 words.

As you look at the results of only the first stage, I believe you can understand why I wanted to do the second stage. And, as you can see, the second stage results confirm those of the first.

Apparently, college students. although their ability to do so is very poor, are much better at pronouncing words than at knowing meanings of words. I usually gave partial results to the classes of students who participated, and one student remarked, "Well we do

best what they taught us most--how to pronounce words--and we don't do that very well." Phonics utility research done by Clymer (1961, 1963), Affleck (1969), Bailey (1967), Emans (1967), Dzama (1975), Burrows and Lourie (1963), Bieri (1977), Caldwell (1978), Vine (1978), and Greif (1980, 1981), and others explains why those who depend on phonic analysis do not pronounce well.

There are probably several reasons why knowledge of meanings is so poor. One is that phonic analytic programs focus on pronunciation to the neglect of meaning. Another is the use of context analysis as a major means of meaning determination, so that meanings of words are more likely known when they are in context. However, comprehension is poor because whatever "meaning makes sense to you, here," as an elementary school student, is not necessarily, nor even very likely to be the author's meaning.

An even larger reason why meanings are not well known is that comprehension is 1) not really valued in early reading programs, 2) hardly taught at all by teachers, 3) nor provided for by basic reading materials. See Durkin's research on that topic (Durkin 1979 and 1981). With that kind of attitude toward comprehension, there isn't much need for teaching meaning vocabulary.

We've had the language experience notion around for 40 plus years, during which time it has slowly come to mean making experience stories (charts) so kids have familiar, easy beginning reading material. But we have hardly used it at all for vocabulary development. It involves personally involved experiences for children, to serve as the basis of meaning, and that usually means field trips, and you know how many of those we don't have.

There is no better source for meanings of words than the recall of a memory of personally involved experiences.

Please put meaning ahead of pronunciation. in fact, put it at the top of the list of priorities in your reading programs.

(Look for a report on a similar project on the vocabulary adequacy of these same students on words taken from a daily newspaper.)

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